

The Chinese Government's Persecution of Uyghur Imams and Islamic Scholars

Statement for the Record
Submitted to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe
Hearing July 13, 2021

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Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for allowing me to submit a statement to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the U.S. Congress.

I am a Uyghur imam and associate professor of theology at Marmara University in Turkey. More than 20 years ago, I had to flee my homeland and come to Turkey because of severe religious repression carried out by the Chinese government. I serve as the president of the East Turkistan Ulema Union, an association of Uyghur imams and religious scholars in the Uyghur diaspora.

I want to tell you about Muhammet Salih, 80 years old, who was one of my teachers in my homeland. Under the Chinese government's campaign of repression, he was arrested for no reason and tortured to death. He was not charged with any crime. His family and neighbors were rounded up, and his daughter Nezire's fate is unclear. This person was brought up in China and served a lifetime in Chinese government offices. He was busy with only scientific activity. The books he wrote were published in the media organs of the Chinese government and distributed by the Chinese authorities. He was the most prudent person I knew, shunning the slightest word or deed against the Chinese government, and the authorities could not tolerate even such a person.

Being a Uyghur and being a clergyman has been made a crime, and Muhammet Salih was one of countless victims of this policy. He was killed and someone of Chinese descent was appointed to replace him. This sent a clear message to the locals: you can live if you become Chinese, but if you live as a Uyghur, we will never let you rest, no matter how loyal you are to the state.

In addition to Muhammad Salih's death, there are others who were also killed in the prisons of the Chinese government, such as Abdulahad Mahsum, Muhammad Eminjan, Kerem Abduweli and many other religious clerks. We still do not know if other religious figures such as Muhammad Abdullah, Yusupjan and Abdulhafez are alive or dead.

Twenty-seven years ago, I had to leave my parents and leave East Turkestan, where I was born and raised. I had not committed a crime against Chinese law. I had simply been educated in the religion that I believed in. The situation in East Turkistan was not as bad as it is now, but police would follow me wherever I went. I felt that my life was in danger and I fled to Kyrgyzstan. I heard that they chased me to the border. Fortunately, I had crossed the border one day before they arrived. Police already notified the newspaper that there would be incentives for my capture.

If I had stayed, I would probably have been killed in some way, just like my friends. I haven't been able to return to my hometown for 27 years, even after I became a Turkish citizen. My mother and father passed away one year apart. I couldn't go to their funerals because I knew that if I went, I would never be allowed to leave. The last time I spoke to my brother back home was 4 years ago, on the phone. At the moment, I do not know whether he is alive or not. I do not know the whereabouts of my relatives. East Turkistan became an open air prison.

The Chinese government's crackdown on the Uyghur people in East Turkestan is multifaceted and continues with impunity. The genocide that China is committing in East Turkestan today is far beyond what was done in the period of Mao Zedong 50 years ago. Mao's political campaigns targeted cultural beliefs and capitalism. But he did not target the identity of the Uyghurs for utter destruction.

Today, the Chinese government's oppression in East Turkistan aims to eliminate our ethno-religious identity. Places of worship are destroyed, books and artifacts used for religious practice, such as the Qur'an, prayer beads, and prayer rugs, are collected and burned in front of the public. Those caught with such things are punished with a prison sentence. Vicious and inhuman torture is reported by witnesses and survivors.

Uyghurs are not allowed to use Islamic names like Abdullah or Muhammed. The culture, beliefs and values of the people are mocked, and clergy are killed. In the last five years, tens of thousands of publicly respected clerics have either been tortured to death in prison, or have disappeared without a trace, and their bodies were not returned back to their families. These clerics did not speak or act against the Chinese government. For many years, they have undergone their training under the observation and supervision of the police. All their preaching and other religious services were carried out with the permission of, and under orders of, the Chinese government.

Distinguished guests, it is not possible to describe exactly what is happening in East Turkestan today. It is not possible to get accurate and up-to-date information because of China's wall of secrecy. I believe that the scale of oppression there is far worse than any of us dare to imagine.

I want to ask the members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and the entire U.S. Congress to take action. I hope you will pass the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. I hope you will pass the Uyghur Human Rights Protection Act. I hope you will pass the Resolution condemning the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity being committed against Uyghurs and members of other religious and ethnic minority groups by the People's Republic of China, introduced by Congressman McCaul and Congressman Meeks.

Uyghurs in Turkey and the whole diaspora around the world are counting on the people of the United States as our only hope. Please act quickly.

Thank you.

Personal Background

I was born in the Şayar district of East Turkestan. After completing my undergraduate education, I went to Turkey in 1995 to continue my education. I received my master's degree from the Marmara University Social Sciences Institute in 1998, and my doctorate in 2002. I was

a faculty member in the Faculty of Theology of Hitit University, near Ankara, in 2012-2014. I became an associate professor in 2018, and currently teach in the Faculty of Theology of Marmara University. Since 2016, I have served as the head of the East Turkestan Ulema Union.

East Turkestan Ulema Union

The East Turkestan Ulema Union was founded in Istanbul in January 2016 by clergy and religious scholars in the Uyghur diaspora. The association membership currently stands at 83, of whom five hold doctoral degrees from Turkish universities in theology, ten hold master's degrees, and 35 hold bachelor's degrees. More than 20 clergy received higher religious education in East Turkestan and are highly regarded for their service in the Uyghur homeland.

The aims of the association include:

1. To respond to all kinds of religious needs of the people of East Turkestan, who have not been given the opportunity to learn about their religion for over 70 years.
2. To promote freedom of belief and religious identity of the people of East Turkestan.
3. To contribute to the solution of the problems faced by East Turkestan people in the diaspora in their religious and social relations.
4. To strengthen dialogue and relations between East Turkestan clergy and intellectuals trained in humanities and sciences in a positive way.

The activities of the association include:

1. Leading social activities for all kinds of needs of the Uyghur people and encourage our people to participate.
2. Providing consultancy and ombudsman services to help resolve difficulties in family relations and financial troubles.
3. Moral and religious guidance and preaching activities.
4. Providing assistance to small establishments offering religious education.